



## The rural school meal as a site for learning about food



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to contribute to the understanding of the school meal as a site for learning about food, nutrition and the wider determinants of health in three small rural schools of Ecuador. Based on a year-long qualitative fieldwork, the multiple case study associates Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning with Noddings' theory of care to analyze the findings. In the study, elements of care in the relationships between children and adults seemed to promote dialogue and, in this way, adults were able to model what is required to care for others and oneself. This entails that a focus solely on food or limitations on social interaction during the school meal may reduce its learning opportunities. The study concurs with the research that the food is better received when it is more aligned with the students' expectations. In addition, the findings support the view that rural school meal programs should address the views of parents and teachers because of their influence on how the meal is prepared and provided. The article proposes that schools work within a flexible framework emphasizing attention to the caring aspects of the meal, as a means to develop this dimension of the school meal. The study also contends that a collaborative reshaping of conditions formally set by school food policy is consistent with a critical approach to food and nutrition. In connection with this, the study concludes by highlighting the value of revisiting Noddings' perspective of care as deriving from the practice of opening up and meeting the other.

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### 1. Introduction

There is increased global interest in addressing the influence of school meals on the knowledge and competences of students regarding food-related issues. For example, the national school nutrition programs of Finland, Sweden and Japan expect teachers to work pedagogically with school meals to help children develop food and nutrition competences (Lintukangas & Palojoki, 2016; Persson Osowski, Göransson, & Fjellström, 2010; Sarlio-Lähteenkorva & Manninen, 2010; Tanaka & Miyoshi, 2012). At a smaller scale, countries like Brazil and Portugal have incorporated educational objectives in school meal programs (Cervato-Mancuso, Westphal, Araki, & Bógus, 2013; da Cunha, de Sousa, & Machado, 2010; da Silva, Schmitz, Rodrigues, & Gabriel, 2013; Porto, Schmitz, Recine, & Rodrigues, 2015; Truninger, Teixeira, Horta, da Silva, & Cardoso, 2013). The school meal provides the opportunity to learn in relation to the different dimensions of food, whether

nutritional, culinary, cultural, social, environmental or political (Benn, 2014; Benn & Carlsson, 2014; Janhonen, Palojoki, & Mäkelä, 2016; Morgan & Sonnino, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). However, thinking of the school meal as a site for learning poses many challenges.

First, improving students' knowledge and attitudes towards nutrition and related health issues requires that the school meal is integrated with the curriculum, as well as providing a supportive school environment and improved communication with parents (Nelson & Breda, 2013). This could demand more resources than available or be perceived as an added burden to the school. Second, the contents or execution of the meal, or the curriculum related to the meal, can produce unintended or undesirable consequences (Phillips & Roberts, 2011). For instance, the positive learning potential of school meals can be diminished if the food is not fully enjoyable (Benn & Carlsson, 2014; Chatterjee et al., 2016). Or, a healthy meal program designed for the majority could give way to adults ridiculing children from an ethnic minority background at school, as it has happened in Denmark (Andersen, Holm, & Baarts, 2015). Studies also show that a national school meal such as the Swedish may have a persistently negative image despite its

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improvements in quality and taste (Persson Osowski et al., 2010). Third, the perspectives of adults such as teachers, parents and dining staff influence how school meal policy is implemented (Moore, Murphy, & Moore, 2011; Walton, Waiti, Signal, & Thomson, 2010).

Concurrently to these issues, there is growing concern that a pedagogic school meal could take away what little is left as free time at school, as well as impose pre-determined food knowledge and behavior, social practices and culture on students, or emphasize competencies over other aspects of the meal such as its social or sensory dimensions (Andersen et al., 2015; Benn & Carlsson, 2014; Coveney, Begley, & Gallegos, 2012; Evans & Rich, 2011; Gullberg, 2006; Smilie, 2013). The idea of the meal as a free moment seems to resonate with both students and teachers, who may resist joining in a pedagogical meal as defined in countries with a national school meal program, such as Sweden or Finland, where specific norms related to diet or dining are expected to be upheld and promoted. As research in Finland shows, a number of students may prefer to eat somewhere else at mealtime or socialize with their friends unrestrained by dining rules (Janhonen et al., 2016). In Brazil as well as Sweden, teachers may feel that the meal exceeds their pedagogical duties, and not become involved (Cervato-Mancuso et al., 2013; da Cunha et al., 2010; da Silva et al., 2013; Persson Osowski et al., 2010; Porto et al., 2015).

This study focuses on the social situations within which the students interact with the material environment, including the food and dining conditions, during the school meal. The premise is that the school meal may be approached from Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective, which views learning as originating in social situations comprised by a child's meaningful interaction with the material environment through human and symbolic mediation (Daniels, 2007; Kozulin, 2002; Vygotsky, 1986, 1994). Vygotsky's theory of learning is associated with Noddings's framework of care to examine the potential or limitations of the school meal for health and nutrition education.

Research on Ecuador's school nutrition policy has argued that the emphasis on academic learning, combined with a reductionist approach to food, disregards the potential of school meals as a site for learning about nutritional and health issues (Torres, 2017). The School Feeding Program (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2012) was introduced in 1980 in Ecuador by the World Food Program, as part of a global nutritional initiative for developing countries. Until 2009, the School Feeding Program delivered staple foods to schools and promoted community participation to plan and prepare lunch for the students, using products grown in the school garden or by local farmers—some of whom were also school parents (World Food Program, 2012). As a result of the WFP's goal of progressively transferring responsibilities to individual states, the SFP in Ecuador became fully funded and operated by the state in 2009.

Around this time, the Ecuadorian government also launched a series of educational incentives aimed at Millennium Development Goal #2, i.e., achieving universal primary education. Additionally to uniforms and textbooks, the Ministry of Education simplified the School Feeding Program in rural areas, providing low-cost refined food supplies including individually packed energy bars, filled cookies and a powdered mix to prepare a warm beverage [*colada*, in Spanish]. Starting in 2009, the instruction was that the *colada* be served alongside an energy bar or a pack of cookies as “breakfast” (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2012; World Food Program, 2012), although given the characteristics of the food supplies it could more accurately be described as a snack. Nevertheless, because the beverage is expected to be warm and may thus involve a more elaborate preparation and even formalized provision, it could be distinguished from the simpler snack as a meal.

According to the research, the School Feeding Program is no

longer linked to school gardens or local farmers, and it is the teachers who are generally in charge of the meal, when before the school may have worked together with parents to provide lunch. The program is described as an incentive for school attendance and a nutritional supplement; it does not cite any educational objectives or pedagogical implications (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2012).

The media periodically have echoed the views and complaints of the parents and teachers regarding the lack of diversity in the food, as well as delivery problems including lack thereof and limited time frame between delivery and expiration date of the products—which was recently acknowledged by the government (El Telégrafo, 2016/11/06). Additionally, the research shows that school nutrition policy is focused on monitoring and regulating behavior, based on a bio-medical approach to nutrition and health. However, the research also finds that existing policy in Ecuador, and particularly the school feeding program, offers some opportunities to establish a school-based approach to nutrition and meals in accordance with the principles of critical health education and a health promoting school approach (Torres, 2017; Torres and Simovska, 2017).

A literature review conducted for this study found that there is limited research on school nutrition programs as a site for learning in developing countries. The body of research which focuses on school feeding programs following the World Food Program's model mainly concentrates on the impact of meals on nutritional status or school attendance (Bundy et al., 2009; Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005). With regard to small rural schools, there is limited research related to health education in general and more so with regard to nutrition education in particular. Studies of small rural schools seem to focus on student academic achievement and pedagogy (Antonio & Lucini, 2007; Benveniste & McEwan, 2000; Kline, 2002; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009) and the school-community relationship (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009; Kinash & Hoffman, 2009; Kline, 2002; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009).

The aim of the article is to improve our understanding of the implications of school meals as a site for learning about nutritional and health issues in small rural schools of a developing country such as Ecuador. The assumption is that school meal programs could inhibit or help to develop and support a critical approach to health addressing its wider social determinants. Attention is given to the possible relevance of physical elements such as dining conditions and the meal's content.

The main research question guiding the study is: What are the potentials and barriers of the school meal in small rural schools in Ecuador to constitute a site for learning about food, nutrition and the wider determinants of health? The subsidiary questions are:

- 1) How are the state-delivered food supplies used or provided in each school?
- 2) How could the material conditions be associated with the social interactions at mealtime?
- 3) How could the resulting social situations be understood from a perspective of learning?
- 4) What are the perspectives of parents and teachers on the learning potential of the school meal?

## 2. Method

This article is based on a year-long qualitative fieldwork in three small rural schools in farming communities of Ecuador, as part of a wider research across home and school focusing on health and nutritional education. Small rural schools are typically located in

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